

Vancouver Island Paddlefest

by Aaron Bichard

For the past nine years, during one spring weekend, Transfer Beach in the Vancouver Island community of Ladysmith has been blanketed with people, paddles and passion. To the untrained eye, it appears as a rainbow of flotsam washed ashore, exquisite ocean offerings being inspected by starry-eyed beachcombers. Literally hundreds of new paddlecraft—kayaks, canoes and paddleboards—line the waterfront for everyone to see.

Activity abounds as paddling enthusiasts inspect, test and occasionally salivate over the newest offerings from the leaders in the industry. The largest names in paddlesports showcase their products while experts share their wisdom and reconnect with fellow floaters. In the protected bay, first-timers whet their appetites for the sport alongside the most wizened veterans. It's a plethora of sport, a celebration of all things paddle and most importantly, a success.

Bud Bell sat back ten years ago and thought about creating an event to promote Ladysmith and paddling at the same time. Other than in a kayak, that was the last sitting back Bud would do. Two years prior to organizing the first Vancouver Island Paddlefest, the commercial diver and his wife, Sheryll, also launched their own business, Sealegs Kayaking Adventures.

"Right from the beginning, both for our business and for Paddlefest, safety and accessibility have been the main focuses," Bell said. "I've always thought that kayaking should be for ages two to ninety-two. Everyone should paddle. We never thought there should be elitism within our event."

The first year, together with a handful of volunteers dedicated to promoting the community, the Bells worked with John Surtees and invited a couple of large manufacturers to

attend the event. "It wasn't a financial success, but it was a success," Bell said, reflecting on the couple of hundred participants who surfaced at the inaugural, non-profit meet. "I think some people's eyes were really opened to the world of paddling, and the event has continued to grow since then."

Last year, at least 3,500 people participated in the two-day affair, trying out new products, receiving lessons from pros and attending workshops.



"Of course we've had our ups and downs—some years we see more people than others," Bell said. "The biggest factor is the weather." While hardcore enthusiasts might not be put off by a little drizzle splattering the kayaks, those looking for a new hobby may see the rain as a sign they should try a drier, indoor sport. A little liquid sunshine will never drown the pas-

sion Bud has for the sport, nor dilute the informative experience visitors to Ladysmith and Vancouver Island Paddlefest will have.

"No matter your level of skill or the amount of experience you bring, you're guaranteed to walk away with a greater knowledge of paddling and the sport," Bell said. "There's always more to learn and there are always people at these gatherings who have had different experiences that they're willing to share."

Of all the things Bell and the organizers of Vancouver Island Paddlefest want people to take away from the event, the two most important are a desire to return to Ladysmith and an understanding of safety on the water.

"Whether you're a beginner or an expert, everything starts with safety," Bell said. "At Paddlefest we have (paddle) patrols and our local Auxiliary Coast Guard on stand-by to make sure everyone is safe. You can have as much as fun as possible in the water but if you aren't safe while you're doing it, it likely won't last very long."

During boat trials and paddling workshops, the experts and volunteers on hand go through the safety aspects of paddling to ensure no one has a bad experience. Workshops focus on self-rescues, rolling and the what-ifs that go along with paddling on an open surface that's constantly changing due to currents, tides and Mother Nature.

Along with an awareness of how to paddle successfully, organizers take the opportunity of having so many paddling enthusiasts in one spot to recognize those within the industry who have made positive impacts. For this year's tenth anniversary, a man whose life work has resulted in thousands of people developing a safe passion for the sport is getting the lifetime achievement award.

Michael Pardy, executive director of Trade Association of Paddle Sports and developer of the highly successful Sea Kayak Instructions and Leadership Systems (SKILS), has made paddling his passion and his profession. "It's been one of the constants in my life," Pardy said. "I'm honored for my peers to think my efforts have made a difference to the sport." Through SKILS, Pardy developed a way to train instructors and leaders to bring a higher level of professionalism to paddling and in turn has touched the lives of thousands.

"Events like Vancouver Island Paddlefest are the most important promotional tools for the sport and needed for those involved on a professional level," he said. "It's essentially a gathering of the tribe to reconnect and share new ideas. The group that puts it together should be thanked."

Thanks aren't what Bell and his team are after, however. "We love our community and we want to show it off to everyone," Bell said. "We think everyone should come visit, and join us for a paddle. Even though I've seen thousands of eagles, every time I see another I'm moved. Paddlefest gets me the same way."

For more information log on to www.paddlefest.bc.ca. 

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